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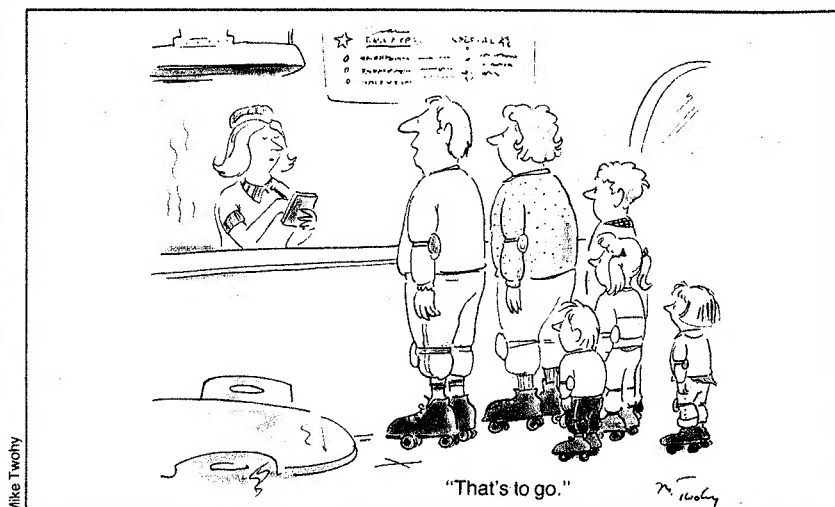
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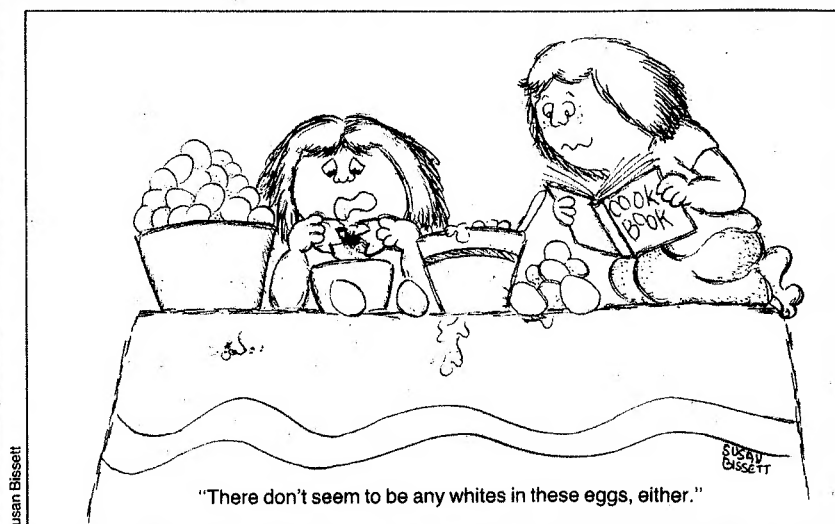
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Wed. 4	Thurs. 5	Fri. 6	Sat. 7	Sun. 8	Mon. 9	Tues. 10
Ash Wednesday	Boston Massacre 1770	Alamo fell, 1836	Bell patented telephone, 1876	International Women's Day	1st patent for false teeth, 1822	Next issue of Woman's World on sale



In the Public Eye

by Jack Ritchie

I peered into the nest again. Two eggs. I had no idea when they would hatch, of course. One cannot determine such an event simply by a quick glance or two.

The two rose-breasted grosbeaks sorted again from the neighboring tree, angrily protesting my intrusion. I closed my eyes for a moment, listening. Yes, quite a distinct pattern of sounds.

I lowered myself to the ground, snagging for a moment the strap of my binoculars, and then I brushed the bark chips and dust from my jacket and trousers.

At the foot of the tree I became aware of heavy footsteps and labored breathing from just beyond the head-high bush at my elbow. In another moment, a bulky form appeared out of the early morning mist.

It was a man carrying a large object draped over his right shoulder. I observed that his burden was clad in a topcoat, from the bottom of which hung trousered legs and shod feet.

The carrier halted and blinked. He seemed to mull over the situation for a moment and then said, "He's much heavier than I thought he would be. Do you mind if I put him down?"

I cleared my throat. "By all means."

He lowered what was obviously a dead body to the damp grass and propped it up against the tree.

I now saw that it was male and, from the stained condition of the area of his chest, that his death had been a violent one.

Then the burden-carrier straightened. He glanced about and I suspected he was considering the option of fleeing, but something restrained him.

He rubbed the side of his neck. "Do you know who I am?"

I nodded.

He sighed. "That damn recognition factor again." He decided to test me. "And just who do you think I am?"

"You are Lieutenant Governor Lucius M. Lambert."

Lucius M. Lambert is not an obscure figure. And he is known not so much for what he is today as for what is expected of him tomorrow.

The Lamberts have been in the public eye for generations. They are a wealthy, close, and driven family that has done well, numbering governors, congressmen, senators and the like, in their line. For Lucius Lambert, the lieutenant governorship is merely baptism into the field of politics. The Lamberts confidently look forward to the day when his initials will appear as routinely in crossword puzzles as JFK and FDR.

Lambert spent a few more seconds in thought and then said, "I happened to be taking my usual morning stroll through the park when I came upon this stranger's body. It looks as though he was mugged, or something like that. I was just in the process of carrying him to someone in authority when..."

He stopped talking. That just wouldn't wash.

I was at rather a loss about what to do. Was Lambert armed? One could logically expect that, couldn't one? Would I be shot down if I attempted to flee or run for the police?

Lambert stared down at the body. "Oliver was a blackmailer. It was a simple case of taking a colleague to a local motel for a drink. The colleague happened to be female. I simply couldn't afford to be involved in any mess like that and besides, my wife would have found out. Unfortunately Oliver happened to witness the event, recognized me, and then proceeded to black-

mail." He shook his head. "Oliver got greedy. Why do blackmailers get so greedy?"

"I wouldn't know."

"It started out as five hundred dollars a month. Then he demanded a thousand. Then two thousand. I knew where all of this was heading. I wasn't born yesterday, you know."

"Certainly not."

"I met Oliver with the revolver in one pocket and two thousand dollars in the other. When he told me that the next payment would have to be three thousand, that was the last straw."

My throat was rather dry. "You shot Oliver here? In the park?"

"No. It happened at our usual meeting place. But I couldn't just leave his body there. It's two hundred yards from the house, but still on our grounds. So I carried him to my car and drove down here to the lake front. I was going to deposit him somewhere along one of these lanes. When his body was found, it would naturally be assumed that he had been killed during an encounter with some hoodlum."

Lambert studied me. "On my way down here, I threw the gun into the river."

Ah, I thought, he no longer has the murder weapon.

Lambert smiled. "Actually if I still had the revolver, I would have shot you too without the slightest hesitation. After all, one might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb." He chuckled. "Frankly, I have very little conscience. I never feel guilty about anything. I just don't like to get caught."

Clearly it was time for me to fetch the police.

Lambert guessed my intention and held up a hand. "Hold it. As you can see, you are in no physical danger from me now. You are larger than I am and I have no black belt in karate. So why not stay a few seconds more and listen?"

He snapped his fingers. "I almost forgot. I'd better take Oliver's wallet to make it all look more believable." He relieved the body of that item.

I was aghast. "You mean you still think you can get

away with this?"

He smiled confidently. "Why not? You look to me like a man who could use two thousand dollars." He pulled a plump envelope from his coat pocket.

I blinked. "Do you seriously expect me to take two thousand dollars to cover up a murder? To turn my back on a gross felony?"

His voice was rather soothing. "But of course not. Not for a paltry two thousand dollars. This is merely the first payment. How does two thousand dollars every month strike you?"

Could I use two thousand dollars? And each month?

No more reporting to that miserable office each morning? No more forty hours per week down the cosmic drain, not to mention the ten or more hours fighting the nerve-shattering traffic?

Tahiti? The Marquesas? Bali?

No. I have devoted years and years to the bird-life of the upper Midwest and I feel that there is still much work to be done.

What would two thousand dollars really buy?

Time. That was it.

Time is living. And yet we are forced to sell time. We sell our lives for three dollars an hour, or five, or fifty.

Lambert pressed home. "I'll arrange that you get the money regularly. And I guarantee that you have absolutely nothing to worry about. Just as long as you don't get greedy, of course."

He stared down at Oliver's body and then a new light seemed to come into his eyes. He clapped a hand to his forehead. "What a fool I've been. What proof do you have that I killed Oliver?"

"Proof? Well, your confession..."

He laughed. "Ha! I deny that I ever made it. Suppose you do go to the police? It would be your word against mine. The word of the lieutenant governor of this state against that of a bird-watcher. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you were labeled some kind of a nut trying to ruin my political career."

He stuffed the envelope

back into his pocket. "As a matter of fact, the police just might decide that it was you who killed Oliver and in a panic came up with that ridiculous story trying to involve me. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes once they start questioning you."

He turned up the collar of his coat and prepared to leave. "I think the best thing for both of us is to turn our backs and go our separate ways. Let some early morning jogger find Oliver's body."

After he disappeared into the mist, I waited for perhaps three minutes and then made my way back up the sloping trunk of the tree to the nest.

Yes, I am a bird watcher, but more specifically, I am a bird listener. I listen to the sounds they make. I also collect them.

I retrieved my recording equipment and slid down the tree to the ground. I rewound the tape and then let it run from the beginning.

First, the relative silence, and then a bit of my wheezing as I had lowered myself down the tree the first time, and then, after a few moments, Lambert's first words, "He's much heavier than I thought he would be. Do you mind if I put him down?"

Every word quite clear, right down to Lambert's final sentence.

It would be no trouble at all to make copies of the tape. I could send one of them to Lambert so he would know I had the proof of his involvement in Oliver's death.

And from the security of my anonymity, I could begin to blackmail him.

Would I get greedy too?

I smiled. Twenty-four hours a day to myself? I could buy a recreational vehicle. I could travel. The Wisconsin Dells in the summer. The Horicon marsh in the fall. Sheboygan in the spring.

I pulled myself together. No. It simply was not meant to be.

I could not allow a future in which a man like Lambert would occupy the White House and sit with his thumb poised over the final red button. No.

I went off in search of a policeman.